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Cheerios

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Jillian Pierce

Cheerios

Cheerios. Cholesterol Free. Yellow Box. Round crunchy donut shapes in a voluptuous red bowl. Good for your heart. Richard Donalee stared at the monument of Cheerios boxes before him. No one knew what to make of him that first day. In fact, almost none of us noticed him at all. His entrance was not grand. We did not notice how he sauntered into the double automatic doors or how his corduroy moccasin slippers shuffled past the produce, the bakery, the meat. We did not notice his dull expression, vacuous eyes, and disheveled brown hair as he tilted his head to the hanging aisle seven sign, scanning the word Cereal. We did not notice this man in flannel Christmas pajamas look left and right searching for the familiarity of the yellow cardboard. Certainly not one of us noticed the pain within Richard as he assumed the position for the first time in front of those Cheerios.

Richard did not notice all that much either. For instance, he did not so much as flinch at the reactions of the innocent bystanders in the cereal aisle. There had been fifteen people say "Oh excuse me" when they bumped into him by accident, ten people had openly stared at him, four had mumbled something to themselves under their breath as they cautiously reached in front of him to retrieve their Cheerios, and seven avoided the aisle altogether and decided to opt for eggs and toast for their breakfast choice of the week. Richard did not move. Three of us had asked him "Sir can I help you with something? ...Sir?" Richard did not answer.

The hours droned on with relatively no interruption in Richard's Cheerio reverie. Sometime that afternoon, when the air started to buzz more of people, squeak more of shopping carts, and beep more of scanning barcodes, a man with a shirt that displayed all the Sesame Street characters smiling a "how do you do?" strolled down the cereal aisle. He walked rather jaggedly, gray-bearded face down to the shiny white tiles, zigzagging the aisle and leaning his body in the appropriate direction, speeding up and slowing down in no apparent pattern. His eyes were wide open, an imaginary piece of tape holding his eyelids and eyebrows to tip of his neon pink baseball cap. Past the Cocoa Puffs, Raisin Bran, Lucky Charms he glided, stopping abruptly in front of the Cheerios upon the sight of corduroy moccasins obstructing his path. He planted his flip-flops just inches away from Richard's moccasins.

One section after another, the Sesame Street man studied Richard's flannel form, cocking his head side to side like a puppy. Richard did not react. The man ogled every inch of Richard the hiked up bottoms, untied drawstrings, the way the fourth buttonhole encompassed the second button,

the contrast of the red lines on the green fabric. It was when he reached the face that the imaginary tape snapped, and Sesame Street man narrowed his eyes. He leaned in to inspect the 5'oclock shadow emerging on Richard's face, the buttery earwax hiding in Richard's left ear, the boogers inconspicuously hanging up Richard's nose. Still, Richard eyes were glazed, faced forward to the memorial of yellow squares.

Sesame Street Man cleared his throat and abruptly poked Richard hard on the side of his cheek. Richard did nothing but blink. Upon noticing the projection of Richard's eyes, Sesame Street Man jerked in a double take, from Richard to the Cheerios and back to Richard. Slower this time, Sesame Street Man turned to study the Cheerios, cocking his head once again to the side.

"Mmmhmmmm, yes, mmmhmmmm" Sesame Street said mumbled, stoking his beard with his dirty long nails. After a minute of this charade, he shouted, "You found it!" and pointed to the ceiling heavens in victory.

Richard was still winning the staring contest with the Cheerios boxes.

Sesame Street Man looked around suspiciously to make sure no cereal boxes were watching. His eyes stopped at the Lucky Charms section, and he brought his finger up to his lips, signifying for the pots of gold and rainbows to keep quiet. He moved stealthily closer to Richard, nonchalantly grasped his hands behind his back, and innocently puckered his lips in a whistle. Suddenly he began to ferociously unbutton Richard's pajama top. He slid the shirt off Richards back, exposing Richard's cream chest and arms, complete with hair, nonchalant moles, and a mark of deodorant that Richard had applied to his shoulder instead of his armpit. Still with no movement from Richard, Sesame Street Man started to put the shirt on himself, one sleeve and then another, inside out.

"Elijah you put that shirt back on that poor soul right this instant!" came a shout from the end of the aisle. Sesame Street Man froze and turned to face his nemesis. A rather well endowed black woman in a red vest and kaki pants came stomping down the linoleum, her white sketchers joining the block party with the flip-flops and the moccasins. Something about her presence made Elijah slowly peel off the pajama top.

"Woopsie Daisies! How did that get here? Really Ruth, I have not the slightest idea," he repented as he reclothed Richard. He seemed to be a nervous store clerk, clumsily buttoning the red plastic in the appropriate orifices of his lifeless flannel mannequin.

"Mhm. Now get out of here. Don't you have anything better to do than to steal from someone more sad and pathetic as you are?" Ruth asked, motioning to the still frozen Richard in the aisle.

Elijah straightened up and tensed his thin body, gave Richard's pajamas one last thorough and hungry look, and marched past Ruth, poignantly raising his knees above his waist and extending the rest of his leg horizontally in between each step. When he got to the end of the aisle, he sharply turned around and shouted, "It's not over Ruth! This means war!" and then broke into a sprint, off to seek more adventures in the depths of the frozen food section.

"With you it is always war, honey," Ruth mumbled as she turned to face Richard. Unlike Elijah, she did not study him or take off his clothes. "And what war are you fightin'?" she asked him softly. He responded with a blink and a large sigh, his now correctly buttoned top rising with his chest and falling again. She pivoted to also face the Cheerios. It was a long time before she spoke again.

"Darlin', whatever you are looking for, I don't think these Cheerios has it. Lord knows I don't have nothing against them, but I don't think they will get you a shower, a hug, a smoke, a girl- whatever you be looking for, it ain't here. And unless you want more fruitcakes like Elijah stealin' your PJ's, I suggest you find another place to do your business." She straightened out one Cheerio box that had been knocked aside, twirled her "Faithful Employee Ten Years" pin, gave him one more concerned look, and walked out of the aisle.

Richard could not help but think. He had not planned on it, but his thoughts were not as controllable as the muscles within his face. Becoming Elijah would be better than this; being crazy was a favorable alternative. That way he wouldn't have to explain why he simply could not stand to wake up in the absence of Cheerios now. Sesame Street Man's insanity protected him from the real. But then there was Ruth. Then Richard decided that was enough thinking.

For many more hours, Richard Donalee stood and stared at those Cheerios boxes, until finally the lights started turning off and the teenage boy with acne and braces started mopping. Without a sound, Richard turned and walked out of the aisle, once again past the meat, bakery, produce, and out the sliding doors.

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Richard had become an icon in the small town outside this place. People began to know him as "The Cheerio Man," a phrase affectionately coined



by a local reporter who had come to interview him. Apparently, after not getting any response out of Richard, the reporter had conjured his own theories about why Richard was staring at the Cheerios. The newspapers arrived in the bins situated right next to the sliding doors a week later. They revealed that he had been in a fatal car wreck, in which a shard of glass had injured his hippocampus, the part of the brain that had anything to do with memory, leaving him with amnesia, to which he could only retained a distinct memory of eating Cheerios. He had lost his marbles completely, and Cheerios were his only source of sanity. He was a politician and had wanted to prove a point-standing in front of the Cheerios was a protest to life without free industry. He was a charity worker, aiming to feed the world's starving children with Cheerios. We didn't know what to believe. The only reality the reporter had been correct about was the actual name and birth date of Cheerio Man- Richard Hudson Donalee, born January 8th, 1976.

The reporter was not the only visitor Richard had. There had been policemen in response to a complaint- disturbance of the peace by those tired of eggs and toast every week, but the policeman couldn't find anything wrong in the man. He wasn't doing anything but standing. There had been psychiatrists and priests, the ones who sought to analyze and save. There had been novelists, painters, and musicians, those who needed inspiration from a new muse. They had all been disappointed, however, for Richard did not utter a word. He had only stared at the boxes of Cheerios as he had always done. Ruth shooed them all away throughout her shifts, her presence dominating over their ambition and confusion. Afterwards she would always go up to the Cheerios Boxes and stare for a while with Richard, telling him, "Don't worry honey, they're gone," and occasionally giving his hand a squeeze. She would often leave protein bars at his feet, only to come back after close to find the whole unopened bar on the floor, the plastic wrapper without a tear, and no Richard to accompany it.

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Richard Donalee was still here to stare at Cheerios boxes. On that particular day, business had been slow. For once there was no beeping of the scanners, no clanging of metal coins inside the cash registers, and no sound of the doors thudding open every time a customer entered. By this time, we had grown so accustomed to Richard; we did not even see him anymore. We did not even notice that today he had actually had graduated from his Christmas pajama flannels and had opted for a pair dark blue jeans and a black Rolling Stones T-Shirt. Richard had become as much as a part of this place as

the Cheerios at which he stared. He and his Cheerios were in peace, left alone and unbothered for most of the day.

Sometime that afternoon, a group of students quietly approached Richard, clutching sketchbooks against their colorful thrift store clothes and pencils sticking out of their high top shoes. They were cautiously following their leader, a short and bony woman with a metallic gold smock moving in cadence with her deliberate strides. Despite her matching four-inch heels, she still only came to Richard's shoulder when she found a spot on the linoleum right next to him.

"And what do you see, students?" she said to them as she glanced up at Richard from the tie-dye glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. The students shuffled around uncomfortably, many of them scanning the other cereal boxes, the ceiling, the floors, visually avoiding Richard's territory. They whispered their doubts to their neighbors and penciled down a note here and there.

"The question is, what is the art here? Is it the Cheerios? Or does the art include the man along with the Cheerios?" the teacher continued. The camera in her hands flashed iridescent, but Richard was still unresponsive. His eyes stilled glared at the shelf, hands limp, cheeks devoid of activity. The students started to get more bold, leaning in close to study him, touch the material of his clothing, move the Cheerios boxes around. "What the hell do you think you are doing?" Ruth again, coming to the rescue. She bounded down the aisle to the crowd, same wrinkly red vest, same employee pin, and same brimming rage.

"Excuse me, we are in the middle of a lecture," the woman snapped. She clawed her lesson plans against her in defense of the Spartan who had come to duel. The students backed away from Richard, retreating to the regions of the Lucky Charms for protection.

"Like heck you are! This man is not just a piece art, so you all just stop your gawkin'! He is a human being- which I believe is more than I can say for you!" Ruth's shouts made the woman shrink even more; her high heels were of no consequence then. Immediately she motioned her ducklings to follow her back to their lake. One by one they left the cereal aisle, abandoning Ruth and Richard once again to the serenity of the Cheerios boxes.

"Well I never! There have been a lot of assholes in here before, but honestly Richard! You sure know how to attract the good ones!" Ruth spat, huffing and puffing from the energy exertion. That is when she noticed his new and improved outfit. "Dang Boy! You look like some hot stuff tonight! You got a date?" Her smile exposed the small gap she had between her two front teeth, but Richard did not notice.

Once again, she turned to face the Cheerios boxes. We all thought she was wasting her time, that maybe she should go back to reading the Oprah magazine to fill the quiet lulls that so often occur in this place. Ruth never cared about what we thought, and tonight was no exception. She stared at them next to Richard for a while in silence and then she began to tell him about the ketchup bottle that had spilled earlier that day and what a pain it was to clean up. She told him about how Elijah had finally found a new group home, somewhere where people could understand and care for him, someplace he would get his own Christmas flannel pajamas. Then, she started telling him about her cats, one named Sasha and one named Felix, they kept her company in her lonely hours away from here. After about an hour, she pulled another protein bar out of her vest and laid it at his feet. Maybe tonight he would actually eat it. After giving his hand another squeeze, Ruth left Richard once again to his Cheerios boxes.

Once the cereal aisle was mute again, Richard's face did something it hadn't done in a very long time. He smiled. It was a quick flutter, his lips slowly allowing his mouth the pleasure, starting only on one side and then spreading contagiously to the other. He let out a puff of air from his nose, the closest thing to a chuckle he could muster. After this his eyebrows bent and eyes grew sad again, and his smile faded from amused to tired. No one but the Cheerios saw his indulgence, for just seconds later it was altogether gone again, only his muscles feeling the after tension. When Ruth closed that night, she found an empty protein bar wrapper in the cereal aisle.

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Although it had started to snow again outside, Richard continued to walk to his spot. By this time, his popularity had clearly diminished. No one else came to stalk him, most here assume a loss of interest, but in reality it was a growing and deathly fear of the Viking Ruth.

Richard was now a part of the routine. We started to regard him as sacred, for he had brought us more business and attention than we had ever had before. We all got a raise because of Richard's contribution and expected lofty Christmas bonuses as well. The acne mop boy could now afford a dermatologist and started saving for a car to impress his infatuation at the prom. Ruth got a new hairdo and a set of pink acrylic nails.

Throughout the days following the incident with the art teacher, only one thing had changed. We had moved the Cheerios from one side of the cereal aisle to the other during inventory. We did it at midnight after close, so



as to avoid disturbing Richard from his slumber. Ruth had tried to break it to him gently the day before, slipping the fact in between the anecdotes about the dial on her microwave breaking and the fool who expected her to know what in the world couscous was and what aisle to find it in. He hadn't sighed or nodded like he had started to every once in a while. Instead he had only raised his lethargic hand up to his head, scratching the scalp underneath the brown locks.

The next day, Richard showed up on time as usual. Richard was different. This time he strolled in with a sharp black business suit, complete with a crisp white oxford under his jacket and baby blue necktie. His shoes were shiny jet black, squeaking the white floor as he walked calmly to the cereal aisle, leaving black marks behind that made not-acne boy cringe a bit. Richard was tucked and buttoned and gelled in all the right places. His hair was cut short, like grass after years of the mower neglecting it. He even had shaved the bush of a beard that had secluded his sunken cheeks for so long that Richard even had forgotten that he had them. Ruth had dropped the chocolates she had been plopping into her mouth when she saw him, double and triple taking, her mouth cavernous.

When Richard reached the Cheerios spot, he discovered that they were not there. He remembered Ruth's warning and pivoted to see the Cheerios on the opposite side. To any other person, the Cheerios boxes looked just the same, but Richard knew they were not. The angle of the overhead light was different, changing the brightness and tone of the yellow, brown, and red shades. He perceived the amount of inches they were apart from each other and the newly neighbored Captain Crunches. The position of the boxes was no longer at eye level, but down below, making his gaze a forty-five degree angle instead of a ninety degree one. Although logically the same size, the boxes somehow seemed smaller to Richard, or maybe his thirty three year old body had grown bigger, realizing its tardiness ten years later.

Richard stumbled a bit, his knees doubling over with the sudden weight of his flimsy body. He caught himself, stood up straight, and looked down once more on the Cheerios. He stumbled again, this time crashing on his knees, the bones on his face juxtaposed against the lemon colored boxes. Richard's body, concealed by the sports jacket, started to convulse violently, and he put his forehead down to the cool white floor to allow room for the blood to go back to his aggravated brain. It didn't occur to him that he was crying. He thought that he was done with that now.

It was hours later when Ruth found Richard- passed out with half the weight on his knees and half on his forehead. Her whole body bounced to her grocery store baby in the middle of the cereal aisle. Ruth savagely shook and pounded him, screaming obscenities to every god of which she



had ever heard. She had both lost and gained customers because of Richard. He should be just a pain in her ass, a hassle she should be ecstatic to be done with. Despite all of that, Ruth had started to cry as she juggled Richard to consciousness.

Richard lurched up so suddenly that he accidentally knocked his head hard against Ruth's, causing a loud yelp to emerge from deep within her heavy chest. He studied Ruth for a second, recognition relaxing back into his eyes. Then, just as suddenly as he had awoke, he threw his arms around Ruth, squeezing her large body to his own thin one.

"What the?" Ruth managed, her arms stuck to the sides of her body, squeezed in captivity by Richard's embrace, halting the air inside her ample body. Richard let go and leaped to his feet. He held out his varicose hands to help Ruth up, and she reluctantly took them, shaking her head in disbelief. It was the first time he had ever squeezed her hands back.

When they were both upright, Richard checked himself all over. He readjusted his tie, rebuttoned his jacket, unzipped and zipped his fly, licked his hands and smoothed out his hair. Then he turned resolutely back to parallel with the shelves. He settled his gaze back down on the Cheerios.

Ruth just softly placed her hand on her hips, her giant mouth ajar, and her eyebrows in protest. A moment later, when she apparently came to her senses. "Uh uh, honey, you do not just give your Ruthie a heart attack and get to just act like nothin' ever happened!"

After Richard did not respond, she released a highpitched "Hmph.". She studied him hard, checking for loose bolts and screws. After a minute, she looked around to see if any of us had caught what just happened. There was no one, no sign of the momentous event occurring at all. Maybe she was hallucinating. She had always been told she was crazy, but she was now starting to believe that all the loonies that came here were starting to rub off on her.

"And how are you Ruthie? Well I'm just fine Richard, thank you for asking," Ruth told Richard as she shook her head spastically. As usual, she surrendered by turning her body to face the Cheerios with a grandiose sigh. This time she did not tell him about her day, or anything at all. She crossed her meaty arms and tapped her foot for a while, and then switched her weight to other side and tapped the opposite foot. Ruth checked her nails and repositioned the tight bun on the side of her head. She twirled the employee button. About a half an hour later, she threw her hands up in defeat. Clearly still angry at the repositioned statue, she turned and began to stomp away.

"Ruth" a voice croaked. Ruth stopped, shook her head, and resumed walking.



Someone cleared his throat.

"Ruth" the voice said louder. Ruth twirled around now to the Cheerio man's face pleading to her. His voice was deeper than she imagined it would be.

Ruth only sighed. "What baby?"

Richard looked from her face back to the Cheerios. He bent down to them, as a Dad would to his four year old to talk to on their level. Slowly he extended his hand out to touch the smooth cardboard surface of a Cheerios box. He shut his eyes tight when he felt it, a jolt of memory through his fingers. Inhaling a quick breath into his nostrils, he opened his eyes and grabbed the side of the box with one hand, and then two. Picking the box up was hard for him; it was a weight heavier than the Olympic weight champions could ever imagine. Once he was stable, he stood up and faced Ruth once again.

"I want...I want..." Richard stammered, "I want to buy a box of Cheerios." His voice was soft and helpless. He gulped, his Adam's apple taking a dive and jutting upwards again.

Ruth closed her eyes and reopened them slowly, nodding in acknowledgment. She had understood completely.

With one last look at his Cheerio kingdom, he rotated and walked toward Ruth, still clutching the single possession in a death grip. He followed her to the checkout counter, with the whole store captivated in various bouts of astonishment, confusion, amusement, and panic. Ruth nodded at him from behind and the counter and he slowly freed his grip of the box into the hands in which had squeezed some life into his own.

She waved the barcode over the scanner, a beep signifying its approval. "That will be two dollars and ninety-five cents Richard." Ruth told him as she put the box carefully into a plastic grocery bag, as if it were a fragile infant being lowered into a cradle.

Richard's hand disappeared for a second as it went swimming in his jacket pockets, outside then inside, again in his pants pockets, right side then left. Finally he discovered a brown leather wallet. His fingers grasped it, expectation lingering in the tips, but doubt spilled on his face. "Three dollars is all I need sweetheart," Ruth encouraged, but Richard's hands were impossible, trembling around the still closed wallet.

"Do you want me to do it?" Ruth asked. Richard lifted his bloodshot eyes to consider the option. He nodded, yielding once again to Ruth's hands the weight of his nightmares.



Ruth opened the wallet and the picture compartment spilled out. There were two funeral prayer cards in the front- one was for a Katherine Joy Donalee and the other for a Hudson Donalee. Slowly she turned the film over to the other side to reveal a film of pictures- a beautiful brunette woman blowing a kiss, a little toe-headed boy coming down a yellow slide, the three of them in matching football propaganda. The last picture was of the boy on the woman's lap, eating a bowl of Cheerios.

When Ruth finally looked up from the wallet smiles of the woman and child, Richard Donalee and his box of Cheerios were gone. He had not even bothered to take his receipt.